

## ***Lecture Review --***

# **Salikoko Mufwene on Global English : Myths and Facts**

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### **Introduction**

Being an avid note-taker at academic conferences, I find myself dictating practically verbatim when a truly great speech is underway: the type of address where you know you are listening to a great mind dispensing brilliant, highly original views. A lecture such as this provides a shortcut to understanding the finely distilled points which come from a lifetime of work, and spurs one on to read more of that scholar's work. Such was the case with Salikoko



Mufwene's keynote speech at the Conference on Globalization and World Englishes at Syracuse University on July 17, 2004 entitled, 'Globalization, Global English, and World Englishes: Myths and Facts.'

### **Background**

Mufwene, born in the African Congo, is currently Frank J. McLoraine Distinguished Service Professor and Chair of the Department of Linguistics at the University of Chicago. He is a humorous, delightfully modest man, and a marvelous presenter, who used a wide variety of power point features to integrate detailed maps and images into his lecture. Mufwene was introduced by Dr. Yamuna Kachru, Professor Emerita of the University of Illinois and wife of Braj B. Kachru. She is named after the most sacred river in India, closely linked to Lord Krishna. Yamuna, as always, was resplendently dressed in a

traditional Indian salwar kameez. She praised Dr. Mufwene as a scholar who has authored scores of major works and made 'monumental contributions' to work in the development of creoles, genetic linguistics, and language endangerment, perhaps best expressed in his 2001 book, *The Ecology of Language Evolution*, published by Cambridge. As succinctly defined on the book's inside jacket, ecologies are, 'internal and external factors which bear on the evolution of a language.' His talk was to center on this theme, and how it relates to the concepts of globalization and world Englishes.

### The Lecture - Various Strands

Dr. Mufwene took the podium, setting the tone by wittily thanking Dr. Kachru as well as conference chair and host Tej Bhatia for 'this platform to express my **heresies!**' Heresies, as we would later find, only to what he terms 'language militants:' those who feel English is threatening the very survival of other languages. Professor Mufwene explained that while colonists imposed their *economic* structures on the rest of the world, *language* cannot be so easily imposed. He explained that new English varieties have been legitimized throughout history, beginning with North America! He mentioned that Latin was spread around the world by 'mercenary non-native speakers' and that the French are in some ways continuing the spread of Latin! Language evolution continues around the world, but he smugly asks the question, "Are we killing our languages?"

Professor Mufwene explained that this controversial issue is somewhat overblown. English is not an agent of 'language destruction.' For him, the spread of Western languages is a 'messy world' of 'deterritorialization and reterritorialization.' There is a certain amount of cultural homogenization occurring, but this has more to do with economic forces. He feels that globalization 'is not about equality,' that it won't 'obliterate disparities between first and third world .... and has increased economic inequities.' But again, it is not the language which is the culprit. He mentions that 'English adopted as a medium is not going to drive Hindi or Nigerian off the planet.' Thus for Mufwene, globalization is not a positive concept from a humanistic standpoint, but he keeps this separate from his view of the linguistic situation, where he does not view English in a particularly threatening light, or as a main force of globalization.

Regarding the development of English, he said, 'you effect changes on the language every time you open your mouth .... just some of us have more influence than others.' There are a number of 'counter forces' which come into play in this process, some leading to a certain amount of uniformity of English, while others lead to a nativization of English. The latter lead to some level of mutual intelligibility, while the former lead to a 'fragmenting,' and

mutual unintelligibility. He agrees with Crystal in a limited sense, that English is 'all over the world,' but adds that it is not spoken by *everybody*, alluding to a lack of depth in its global penetration. He also questions the radical nature of the term 'new Englishes' with the comment: "What modern variety is not new?" For Mufwene, world Englishes is perhaps nothing more than an extension of complicated linguistic changes which have been evolving for millennia.

In the spirit of his earlier 'heresy' comment, Salikoko then quipped, "I'm going to share a **subversion** with you!" The audience leaned forward in their chairs. Perhaps most attendees felt that the emergence of world Englishes is part and parcel of the globalization process, but he related a recent personal communication from Braj Kachru, in which he stated, "world Englishes is independent of whether or not English functions as a world language." In other words, new varieties of English are developing for various reasons, and it is not a major threat to other world languages. Extending this point, Mufwene began to introduce what is a most important distinction for him: that of 'non-plantation *settlement* colonies,' versus '*exploitation* colonies.' In the settlement colonies, English progressed from pidgin, to creole to vernacular. It then also becomes an important *intranational* lingua franca for the educated classes within that country. In the exploitation colonies, by contrast, where Europeans didn't want to settle but simply exploit the resources, English is purely a lingua franca/lexifier. As a result, English is, "more a risk to indigenous languages in the former settlement colonies than in exploitation colonies. For Mufwene, the implications of this are important. He stated that, "A vernacular competes with other vernaculars, a lingua franca competes with other lingua francas that it shares ethnographic functions with." Thus, he continues, "English is challenging French only in Africa, not in France."

## Synthesis

In an attempt to bring together these various strands, Dr. Mufwene asks, "How global can English be? Only in the U.S., U.K. and former settlement colonies is it spoken by large segments of the society." He further asks, "Is English a driver of globalization, or a 'free rider'?" An interesting proposition! He mentioned that in the cafeteria at the National University of Singapore, a prime 'outer circle' nation, he orders food by pointing his finger! Clearly the depth of penetration has not reached cafeteria workers there. For Mufwene, this strengthens his argument, "globalization doesn't *need* English. American businessmen are not language missionaries! They want to make money. MacDonald's doesn't sell burgers in English in France." He reminds us also, "The Brits only cared about a small percentage of leaders in India and similar colonies."

Mufwene then poses the question, "Is there going to be an English-only Europe, or India?" He answered his rhetorical question with an emphatic, "No! The 'language militants' are doing the world a disservice. You don't have to give up your native language." He stressed that, "a language doesn't spread by ideology, but by action:" giving the example of Ireland, where Gaelic is more an ideology, and like Latin taught only in school, it disappears. Conversely, with language as action, in Quebec one must use French in business, and hence its survival. Dr. Mufwene once again stressed the importance of his key distinction, between a vernacular and a lingua-franca. For him, English is more often in the lingua franca role, and hence he is 'anti-Crystal' in his objection to that scholar's prediction that "English will kill off all languages in 500 years!" He reminded us of a quote from Harvard's leading evolutionary biologist, Stephen J. Gould, that, "theories of evolution are about the past, not the future." Nevertheless, Salikoko provides some hints about future directions: "Jamaican creole is stigmatized, but is becoming more dynamic. In Nigeria, the masses are not benefiting from all the dollars going into English in spite of parents trying to give their children all the advantages. Singapore won't evolve into an English-only culture." These examples seem to strengthen his vernacular/lingua franca dichotomy. In our own Japanese context, one can't help note his comment about Nigerian parents.

## Conclusion

While none of us possesses a crystal ball, the future of English will be very interesting. Professor Salikoko Mufwene provides us with some valuable insights, and strengthens the basic Kachruvian tenet that bilingualism goes hand-in-hand with world Englishes. It bodes well for the diversity of our planet. A speech such as this adds new dimensions to the study of world Englishes, and reminds us once again of the value of an interdisciplinary approach to learning. I hope I have been able to spur your interest in this wonderful man, and that you may be inspired to go directly to the source, and read some of his work.

## References

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